

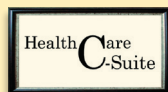
FOCUS ON: Resilience – the Secret of Peak Performance

By Ellen “Plum” Cluverius, PCC and J. Stephen Lindsey, FACHE



Resilience is the ability to perform in this storm, to keep energized and focused, to flourish and grow in what Antioch University professor Peter Vaill called “permanent white water.”

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Adversity, heightened pressure and demands on our time threaten our ability to achieve all that we hope to accomplish in life, but strengthening our resilience can make what seems impossible, possible.

“I have seen ... patients with multiple social problems keep a positive attitude and overcome tremendous odds in battling illness.”

— Dan Jannuzzi, Medical Director, CrossOver Health Care Ministry

Life throws us a lot of curve balls, like the one it threw Mike Maury. Mike dreamed of playing high school basketball but when he tried out, he didn't make the team. He decided to become the team manager and the story could have ended there — as it does for many people. But Mike practiced every day and by his senior year, he was a starter on the team. Not only that, but he made the all-city team and received a basketball scholarship to college. Mike had resilience — the ability to bounce back from adversity stronger than before.

We live in a world that is increasingly stressful and demanding. We are constantly bombarded by things that knock us off center — by crises, disappointments, job demands, deadlines, world events. Resilience is the ability to perform in this storm, to keep energized and focused, to flourish and grow in what Antioch University professor Peter Vaill called “permanent white water.”

What makes people more resilient? We all know people like Mike Maury — people who don't give up and achieve success in the end. We all know people who work long hours with demanding schedules yet who remain cheerful and unruffled and who seem to genuinely enjoy their day. How do they do it? Are they born that way?

Positive psychology researcher and author Barbara Fredrickson and performance psychologist Jim Loehr are among many scientists and practitioners who suggest resilience is learned. Loehr made his first discoveries about resilience after watching professional tennis players. He had assumed that what differentiated good from great tennis players had something to do with how they moved their bodies. Instead, his observations demonstrated that it was how the player acted between points

FOCUS ON: Resilience – the Secret of Peak Performance

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and matches that made the difference. Players who excelled took advantage of the seconds or minutes when they weren't playing to relax themselves and to focus on future success. They were able to maintain peak performance throughout the match. Players who got angry or frustrated or excited were more likely to burn out.

Loehr calls those brief moments of rest "strategic recovery." He says that the same stress-recovery cycle that the exceptional tennis players used (periods of intense work followed by a period of rest and recovery) is what builds resilience. Stress causes damage to our bodies and minds and recovery repairs that damage and builds capacity, much like a muscle strained by lifting heavy weights will repair itself and grow stronger. Loehr says we actually need stress to be productive because it is the stress-recovery process that builds our resilience and our capacity to sustain peak performance all day long. By creating recovery periods throughout our day, the way tennis players relaxed between matches, we can take advantage of the stress-recovery cycle and continually build our strength for the next challenge.

Fredrickson, whose life work is the study of positive emotions, has demonstrated how positive emotions build our capacities to think creatively when faced with difficult situations. Negative emotions like fear and anger tend to narrow our focus toward the object of the threat. For example, if someone gets under your skin at a meeting because they took a cheap shot at you or are taking up too much airtime, it becomes difficult to concentrate on anything other than that person's behavior. Negative emotions also drain our energy, leaving us with less capacity to face the next challenge. Fredrickson's research has demonstrated that positive emotions broaden our focus, allowing us to see new opportunities and solutions that are invisible, and build our energy for the next challenge.

There are specific things we can do to build resilience, including the following:

- **Find the "Bright Spots."** Jerry Sternin was given six months to end childhood malnutrition in two villages in Vietnam. He couldn't eliminate the usual suspects — poverty and ignorance — in that time frame. So he found poor mothers with healthy babies and learned that they supplemented the normal diet of rice with paddy shrimps and sweet potato greens and fed their babies smaller meals several times a day instead of the normal two meals other villagers ate. These mothers were the "bright spots," where despite the difficulties, things were working. By looking for what's working instead of focusing on the problems, Sternin was able to discover workable solutions to an intractable problem.

FOCUS ON: Resilience – the Secret of Peak Performance

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- **Replace Negative Memory with Positive Memory.** After making a mistake, it is easy to focus on what went wrong and to worry about the same thing happening again. Loehr found that unexceptional tennis players did just that. On the other hand, exceptional players visualized their next success or remembered a time when they made a successful play.
- **Focus on What You Want.** Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson describes in his book, *The Practical Neuroscience of Buddha's Brain* how the human brain is hardwired to focus on perceived threats and to remember emotions like fear and anger more vividly than positive emotions like love or joy. That means our natural tendency is to focus on what we don't want ("I don't want to be a failure") rather than what we do want ("I want to be a CEO"). But we now know that negative emotions dampen our creativity. Focusing on what you do want and builds hope and expands the mind.
- **Take Baby Steps Toward Your Goals.** Achieving big things from where you are now often seems overwhelming. But like Mike Maury, if you concentrate only on what you need to do today to move you toward your goal, you are less likely to be overwhelmed by how distant that goal seems.
- **Take Time Every Day to Do Things You Enjoy and Find Meaningful.** We build our capacity to be resilient if we take time to recover and replenish ourselves. Creating daily rituals (repeated actions that become habits) that create time and space for meaningful activities builds our capacity to get more done in less time. A 10 minute nap in the afternoon, breakfast with the kids when you are focused only on them, a run in the morning builds energy so you can sustain performance throughout the day.
- **Attend to Your Physical Health.** Exercise, healthy eating habits, getting enough sleep and limiting alcohol consumption all contribute to resilience by building our physical endurance and reducing stress.
- **Create a Space and Time to Think.** Executives can get caught spending all of their time putting out fires, which means there is little quality time to develop long-term strategy or anticipate the market. Setting aside time to plan and research and just think — is critical in the "white water" that is healthcare today. Experience demonstrates that our best ideas tend to come in the shower or on a run, rather than at our desks.

FOCUS ON: Resilience – the Secret of Peak Performance

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- Create a space and time to think.
- Control your calendar.
- Get in touch with what's most important to you.

- **Control Your Calendar.** Speaking of space and time to think, one key way to make sure you get that time to think is to make sure only you or a trusted assistant can schedule your time. When open scheduling is allowed it is so easy to wind up in one meeting after another, or worse — double booked.
- **Get in Touch with What's Most Important to You.** Resilience is centered on choice. We are hardwired to do the urgent — even if it's unimportant. Choosing to focus on the important rather than the urgent requires making a conscious decision: to set aside the things demanding our attention, and concentrate on the things that connect with our deepest values and purpose. So, keep your values and purpose at the top of your mind. Identify the impact you want to leave on the people around you, and refer back to your values and purpose on a regular basis. This will help you focus your attention, use your time more effectively, and make better decisions.

Resources

You Tube Videos

- *Barbara Fredrickson on Positivity:*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ds_9Df6dK7c
- *Jim Loehr on Stress:*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybfPNevrF00>
- *Jim Loehr on Resilience:*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eMYS_yl2wE&NR=1&feature=fvwp

Websites and Web Articles

- www.positivity.com
- <http://www.rickhanson.net/>
- http://www.managementconsultingnews.com/interviews/loehr_interview.php

Books

- *"The Practical Neuroscience of Buddha's Brain"*
By Rick Hanson, Ph.D. and Richard Mendius, MD
- *"The Power of Full Engagement"*
By Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz
- *"Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive"*
By Barbara Fredrickson, Ph.D.